

The BRONZE BELL

BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE
AUTHOR OF "THE BRASS BOWL," ETC.
ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS

In this superficial accident of facial contours and complexion. No one knowing Amber (let us say) could ever have mistaken him for Rutton; and yet any one, strange to both, armed with a description of Rutton, might pardonably have believed Amber to be his man. Yet manifestly they were products of alien races, even of different climes—their individualities as dissimilar as the poles.

"Hiding!" Amber reiterated in a tone scarcely louder than a whisper. "And you have found me out, my friend."

"But—let I don't—"
Rutton lifted a hand in deprecation; and as he did so the door in the rear of the room opened and Doggott entered. Cat-like, passing behind Amber, he placed upon the table a small tray, and from a steaming pitcher poured him a glass of hot spiced wine. At a look from his employer he filled a second.

Amber lifted his fragrant glass. "You're joining me, Rutton?"

"With all my heart!" The man came forward to his glass. "For old sake's sake, David. Shall we drink a toast?" He hesitated, with a marked air of embarrassment, then impulsively swung his glass aloft. "Drink standing!" he cried, his voice oddly vibrant. And Amber rose. "To the king—the king, God bless him!"

"To the king!" It was more an exclamation of surprise than an echo to the toast; nevertheless Amber drained his drink to the final drop. As he resumed his seat, the room rang with the crash of splintering glass; Rutton had dashed his tumbler to atoms on the hearthstone.

"Well!" commented Amber, lifting his brows questioningly. "You are sincere, Rutton. But who in blazes would ever have suspected you of being a British subject?"

"Why not?"

"But it seems to me I should have known—"

"What have you ever really known about me, David, save that I am myself?"

"Well—when you put it that way—little enough—nothing." Amber laughed nervously, disconcerted. "But, seriously now, this foolish talk about hiding is all a joke, isn't it?"

"No," said Rutton soberly; "no, it's no joke." He sighed profoundly. "As for my recent whereabouts, I have been—ah—traveling considerably; moving about from pillar to post."

To this the man added a single word, the more significant in that it embodied the nearest approach to a confidence that Amber had ever known him to make: "Hunted."

"Hunted by whom?"

"I beg your pardon," Rutton bent forward and pushed the cigarettes to Amber's elbow. "I am—ah—so preoccupied with my own mean troubles, David, that I had forgotten that you had nothing to smoke. Forgive me."

"That's a matter, I—"

Amber cut short his impatient catechism in deference to the other's mute plea. And Rutton thanked him with a glance—one of those looks which, between friends, are more eloquent than words. Sighing, he shook his head, his eyes once more seeking the flames. And silently studying his face—the play of light from lamp and hearth throwing its features into ashen relief—for the first time Amber, his wits warmed back to activity from the stupor the bitter cold had put upon them, noticed how time and care had worn upon the man since they had last parted. He had never suspected Rutton to be his senior by more years than ten, at the most; tonight, however, he might well be taken for fifty. Impulsively the younger man sat up and put a hand upon the arm of Rutton's chair. "What can I do?" he asked simply.

Rutton rounded, returning his regard with a smile now, charming, infinitely sad. "Nothing," he replied; "absolutely nothing."

"But surely—"

"No man can do for me what I cannot do for myself. When the time comes—he lifted his shoulders lightly—"I will do what I can. Till then—"

He diverged at a tangent. "After all, the world is quite as tiny as the worn-out aphorism has it. To think that you should find me here! It's less than a week since Doggott and I hit upon this place and settled down, quite convinced we had, at last, lost ourselves—and might have peace, for a little space at least! And now," concluded Rutton, "we have to move on."

"Because I've found you here?"

"Because you have found me."

"I don't understand."

"My dear boy, I never meant you should."

"But if you're in any danger—"

"I am not."

"You're not! But you just said—"

"I'm in no danger whatever; humanity is, if I'm found."

"I don't follow you at all."

Again Rutton smiled wearily. "I didn't expect you to, David. But this misadventure makes it necessary that I should tell you something; you must be made to believe in me. I beg you to; I'm neither mad nor making game of you." There was no questioning the same sincerity of the man. He continued slowly. "It's a simple fact, incredible but absolute, that were my

whereabouts to be made public, a great, a staggering blow would be struck against the peace and security of the world. Don't laugh, David; I mean it."

"I'm not laughing, Rutton; but you must know that's a pretty large order. Most men would—"

"Call me mad. Yes, I know," Rutton took up his words as Amber paused, confused. "I can't expect you to understand me; you couldn't unless I were to tell you what I may not. But you know me—better, perhaps, than any living man save Doggott—"

and one other. You know whether or not I would seek to delude you, David. And knowing that I could not, you know why it seems to me imperative that, this hole being discovered, Doggott and I must betake ourselves elsewhere. Surely there must be solitudes—!" He rose with a gesture of impatience and began restlessly to move to and fro.

Amber started suddenly, flushing. "If you mean—"

Rutton's kindly hand forced him back into his chair. "Sit down, David. I never meant that—never for an instant dreamed you'd intentionally betray my secret. It's enough that you should know it, should occasionally think of me as being here, to bring misfortune down upon me, to work an incalculable disaster to the progress of this civilization of ours."

"You mean," Amber asked uncertainly, "thought transference?"

"Something of the sort—yes." The man came to a pause beside Amber, looking down almost pitifully in his face. "I daresay all this sounds hopelessly melodramatic and neurotic and tommyrotic, David, but . . . I can tell you nothing more. I'm sorry."

"But only let me help you—any way in my power, Rutton. There's nothing I'd not do."

"I know, David. I know it. But my case is beyond human aid, since I am powerless to apply a remedy myself."

"And you are powerless?"

Rutton was silent a long moment. Then, "Time will tell," he said quietly. "There is one way . . ." He resumed his monotonous round of the room.

Mechanically Amber began to smoke, trying hard to think, to penetrate by reasoning or intuition the wall of mystery which, it seemed, Rutton chose to set between himself and the world.

Presently he grew conscious that Rutton was standing as if listening, his eyes averted to the windows.

"What is it?" he inquired at length, unable longer to endure the tensely of the pause.

"Nothing. I beg your pardon, David."

Rutton returned to his chair, making a visible effort to shake off his preoccupation. "It's an ugly night, out there. Lucky you blundered on this place. Tell me how it happened. What became of the other man—your friend?"

The thought of Quain stabbed Amber's consciousness with a mental pang as keen as acute physical anguish. He jumped up in torment. "God!" he cried chokingly. "I'd forgotten! He's out there on the bay, poor devil!—freezing to death if not drowned. Our boat went adrift somehow; Quain would insist on going after her in a leaky old skiff we found on the shore . . . and didn't come back. I waited till it was hopeless, then concluded I'd make a try to cross to Shampton by way of the tidal bar. And I must!"

"It's impossible," Rutton told him with grave sympathy.

"But I must; think of his wife and children, Rutton! There's a chance yet—a bare chance; he may have reached the boat. If he did, every minute I waste here is killing him by inches; he'll die of exposure! But from Shampton we could send a boat—"

"The tide falls about midnight tonight," interrupted Rutton, consulting his watch. "It's after nine—and



Rutton Turned to the Fire, His Head Drooping Despondently.

there's a heavy surf breaking over the bar now. By ten it'll be impassable, and you couldn't reach it before 11. Be content, David; you're powerless."

"You're right—I know that," groaned Amber, his head in his hands. "I was afraid it was hopeless, but—"

"I know, dear boy, I know!"

With a gesture of despair Amber resumed his seat. For some time he remained deep sunk in dejection. At length, mastering his emotion, he looked up. "How did you know about Quain—that we were together?" he asked.

"Doggott saw you land this morning, and I've been watching you all day with my field-glasses, planned to take cover the minute you turned my way. Don't be angry with me, David; it wasn't that I didn't yearn to see you face to face again, but that . . . I didn't dare."

"Oh, that!" exclaimed Amber with an exasperated frown of his hand. "Between the two of you—you and Quain—you'll drive me mad with worry."

"I'm sorry, David. I only wish I might say more. It hurts a bit to have you doubt me."

"I don't doubt," Amber declared in desperation; "at least, I mean I won't if you'll be applicable and let me stand by and see you through this trouble—whatever it is."

Rutton turned to the fire, his head drooping despondently. "That may not be," he said heavily. "The great set service you can do me is to forget my existence, now and henceforth, erase our friendship from the tablets of your memory, pass me as a stranger should our ways ever cross again." He flicked the stub of a cigarette into the flames. "Kismet!"

I mean that, David, from my heart. Won't you do this for me—one last favor, old friend?"

Amber nodded.

"Then . . ." Rutton attempted to divert the subject. "I think you said Quain? Any relation to Quain's 'Aryan Invasion of India'?"

"The same man. He asked me down for the shooting—owns a country place across the bay: Tanglewood."

"A very able man; I wish I might have met him. . . . What of your self? What have you been doing these three years? Have you married?"

"I've been too busy to think of that. . . . I mean, till lately."

"Ah?"

Amber flushed boyishly. "There was a girl at Quain's—a guest. . . . But she left before I dared speak. Perhaps it was as well."

"Why?"

"Because she was too fine and sweet and good for me, Rutton."

"Like every man's first love."

The elder man's glance was keen—too keen for Amber to dissimulate successfully under it. "You're right," he admitted ruefully. "It's the first sure-enough trouble of the sort I ever experienced. And, of course, it had to be hopeless."

"Why?" persisted Rutton.

"Because—I've half a notion there's a chap waiting for her at home."

"At home?"

"In England." The need for a confidant was suddenly imperative upon the younger man. "She's an English girl—half English, that is; her mother was an American, a schoolmate of Quain's wife; her father, an Englishman in the Indian service."

"Her name?"

"Sophia Farrell." A peculiar quality, a certain tensely, in Rutton's manner, forced itself upon Amber's attention. "Why?" he asked. "Do you know the Farrells? What's the matter?"

Rutton's eyes met his stonily; out of the ashen mask of his face, that suddenly had whitened beneath the brown, they glared, afire but unseeing. His hands writhed, his fingers twisting together with cruel force, the knuckles gray. Abruptly, as if abandoning the attempt to reassert his self-control, he jumped up and went quickly to a window, there to stand, his back to Amber, staring fixedly out into the storm-racked night. "I knew her father," he said at length, his tone constrained and odd, "long ago, in India."

"He's out there now—a political, I believe they call him, or something of the sort."

"Yes."

"She's going out to rejoin him."

"What!" Rutton came swiftly back to Amber, his voice shaking. "What did you say?"

"Why, yes. She travels with friends by the western route to join Colonel Farrell at Darjeeling, where he's stationed just now. Shortly after I came down she left. Mrs. Quain had a wire a day or so ago, saying she was on the point of sailing from San Francisco. . . . Good Lord, Rutton! are you ill?"

Something in the man's face had brought Amber to his feet, a prey to inexpressible concern; it was as if a mask had dropped and he were looking upon the soul of a man in mortal torture.

"No," gasped Rutton, "I'm all right. Besides," he added beneath his breath, so that Amber barely caught the syllables, "it's too late."

As rapidly as he had lost he seemed to regain mastery of his inexplicable emotion. His face became again composed, almost immobile, and stepping to the table he selected a cigarette and rolled it gently between his slim brown fingers. "I'm sorry to have alarmed you," he said, his tone a bit too even not to breed a doubt in the mind of his hearer. "It's nothing serious—a little trouble of the heart, of long standing, incurable—I hope."

Perplexed, yes, hesitating to press him further, Amber watched him furtively, instinctively assured that between this man and the Farrells there existed some extraordinary bond; wondering how that could be, convinced in his soul that somehow the entanglement involved the woman he loved, he still feared to put his suspicions to the question, lest he should learn that which he had no right to know—and while he watched was startled by the change that came over Rutton. At ease, one moment, outwardly composed, if absorbed in thought, the next he was rigid, every muscle taut, every

nerve taut as a steel spring. His head jerked back suddenly, his gaze fixing itself first upon the window, then shifting to the door. And his fingers, contracting, tore the cigarette in half.

"Rutton, what the deuce is the matter?"

Rutton seemed not to hear; Amber got his answer from the door, which was swung wide and slammed shut. A blast of frosty air and a flurry of snow swept across the room. And against the door there leaned a man puffing for breath and coughing spasmodically—a gross and monstrous bulk of flesh, unclean and unwholesome to the eye, attired in an extravagant array of colored garments, tawdry silks and satins clinging, adden to his ponderous and unwieldy limbs.

"The babu!" cried Amber unconsciously; and was rewarded by a flash of recognition from the coal-black, beady, evil eyes of the man.

But for that involuntary exclamation the tableau held unbroken for a space; Rutton standing transfixed, the torn halves of the cigarette between his fingers, his head well up and back, his stare level, direct, uncompromising, a steady challenge to the intruder.

Then, demanding Amber's silence with an imperative movement of his hand, Rutton spoke. "Well, babu!" he said quietly, the shadow of a bitter and weary smile curving his thin, hard lips.

The Bengali moved a pace or two from the door, and plucked nervously at the throat of his surcoat, finally managing to insert one hand in the folds of silk across his bosom.

"I seek," he said distinctly in Urdu, and not without a definite note of menace in his manner, "the man calling himself Rutton Sahib?"

Very deliberately Rutton inclined his head. "I am he."

"Huzoor!" The babu laboriously doubled up his enormous body in profound obeisance. Having recovered, he nodded to Amber with the easy familiarity of an old acquaintance. "To you, likewise, greeting, Amber Sahib."

"What!" Rutton swung sharply to Amber with an exclamation of amazement. "You know this fellow, David?"

The babu cut in hastily, stimulated by a pressing anxiety to clear himself. "Huzoor, I did but err, being misled by his knowledge of our tongue as well as by that pale look of you he wears. And, indeed, is it strange that I should take him for you, who was told to seek you in this wild land?"

"Be silent!" Rutton told him angrily.

"My lord's will is his slave's." Resignedly the babu folded his fat arms. "Tell me about this," Rutton demanded of Amber.

"The ass ran across me in the woods south of the station, the day I came down," explained Amber, sum-

(To be Continued.)

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Administrator's Notice.
Notice is hereby given that letters of administration on the estate of Richard Purkerson, col., deceased, have been granted me by the Probate Court of Chariton County, Mo., bearing date of Jan. 26, 1911. All persons having claims against said estate are required to exhibit them for allowance within one year from date of said letters, or they may be precluded from having any benefit of said estate, and if such claims are not presented within two years, they shall be forever barred.

M. W. ANDERSON,
Administrator.

To Whom It May Concern.
You are hereby notified that Robert Purkerson, colored, is to make his home with Archie Christopher, colored, and he is not to be hired by any other. 51 2t

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